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A study on Emotional Intelligence and its relation with Stress and Mental Health among University Students

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Abstract: University life while often exciting, often comes with challenges such as academic pressures, social adjustments, and uncertainty about future careers. These factors often leading to elevated stress levels and compromised mental health. Identifying protective factors like emotional intelligence which includes the ability to recognize, manage and understand emotions has become extremely important. Stress refers to the psychological and physiological response to perceived challenges, while mental health reflects emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, stress, and mental health among university students. The study sampled 70 university students. Standardized psychological scales were administered to measure emotional intelligence, stress, and mental health levels. Results revealed that emotional intelligence was significantly positively correlated with mental health and negatively correlated with stress, while stress showed a significant negative relationship with mental health. These findings highlight the importance of fostering emotional intelligence in educational settings as a strategy to reduce stress and promote better mental health among students. Further interventions could include emotional intelligence training programs and stress management workshops to enhance resilience and psychological well-being.

Keywords: *Emotional Intelligence, Stress, Mental Well Being, University Students*

1. Introduction

In an age where academic success is highly prized, emotional well-being often takes backseat, leaving students vulnerable to stress and declining mental health. Academic life is

more than the pursuit of dreams- it's a constant battle, with stress lurking like a silent shadow through lecture halls, libraries, and late-night study sessions. Recent research highlights the alarming deterioration in student's mental health. Emmerton, Camilleri and Sammut (2024) found a significant proportion of 820 university students reported severe and extremely severe levels of anxiety, stress and depression, marking a substantial increase compared to previous years. Similarly, Lipson et al. (2022) investigated trends in college student mental health and observed that in 2020-2021, over 60% of students met criteria for one or more mental health problems, which was nearly a 50% increase from 2013. These findings highlight the growing vulnerability of students to psychological distress, making it essential to explore factors that can mitigate these effects

One such factor is emotional intelligence, which involves recognizing, understanding, and regulating both your emotions and others' emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, overcome challenges and communicate effectively. Stress, on the other hand, is a natural response to academic challenges but it becomes problematic when chronic or overwhelming. Elevated stress levels are also linked to impaired cognitive functioning, poor academic performance and an increased risk of anxiety and depression. Higher emotional intelligence has been associated with better coping strategies and resilience against stress. This is supported by Fteiha and Awwad (2020) who reported a strong positive correlation between emotional intelligence and stress coping styles. Mental health encompasses psychological well being and the absence of significant emotional distress. High prevalence of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression highlights the need for factors that can mitigate these risks.

The purpose of this study is to examine the interplay between emotional intelligence, stress and mental health among university students. By exploring these associations through a review of existing literature and ongoing research, this study aims to provide insights that can guide interventions to promote resilience and psychological well-being in higher educational settings.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence has been widely conceptualized and studied in relation to psychological functioning and well-being. Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2000) defined emotional intelligence as the "ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others." Similarly, Cherniss and Goleman (2001) in their book '*The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace*' describe Emotional Intelligence as the "ability to recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and others." Empirical research has further highlighted the significance of

emotional intelligence in mental health outcomes. For instance, Ciarrochi, Deane and Anderson (2002), in a cross-sectional study on 302 Australian university students, found greater suicidal ideation among those who scored lower on managing others' emotions, suggesting that Emotional Intelligence (EI) is an important link in understanding the relationship between stress and mental health. More recently, Shengyao et al. (2024) studied 518 undergraduate and post graduate university students in China and the study revealed a positive correlation between emotional intelligence, favourable psychological traits, psychological well-being, and academic success, with stronger effects observed among postgraduate students.

Stress

Stress has been conceptualized and examined from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Selye (1946) in his book *'The Stress of life' defined stress as a "nonspecific response of the body to a demand,"* providing one of the earliest and most influential conceptualizations. Later, Koolhaas et al., (2011) refined the definition, proposing that the term stress should specifically be applied to unpredictable and uncontrollable situations in which the environmental demands exceed the natural regulatory capacity of an organism. Research has also explored how stress relates to individual coping abilities and mental health outcomes. For instance, Zurilla et al. (1991) investigated the relationship between social problem-solving ability and later psychological stress among first semester college students, finding that stress was negatively correlated with problem solving ability. More recently, Barbayannis et al. (2022) surveyed 843 college students to evaluate whether academic stress affected their mental health reported a significant correlation between worse academic stress and poor mental well-being in all students.

Mental Health

Mental health has been defined and examined in diverse ways within psychological research. Wren-Lewis and Alexandrova (2021) describes it as a "fundamental good, serving as the psychological foundation to pursue any vision of a fulfilling life, including well-being, while remaining distinct from well-being itself." Similarly, Scheid and Brown (2010) in part 1 of *'The Handbook for the Study of Mental Health'* emphasised that "mental health is not just the absence of disease or disorder, it includes self- esteem and the ability to maintain meaningful relationships with others." Empirical studies have further explored the role of emotional intelligence in shaping mental health outcomes. Extremera and Berrocal (2014) studied the association between Emotional Intelligence, Anxiety, Depression, Mental, Social, and Physical Health in 184 university students. The researchers found that higher levels of

emotional clarity and mood repair were associated with lower anxiety and depression alongside greater physical, social and mental health. Likewise, Faghirpour et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health among 503 high school students and concluded that individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to have better overall mental health.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose is to study emotional Intelligence and its relationship with stress and mental health among university students.

1.2 Hypothesis

H1: Emotional intelligence will have a positive relationship with mental health among university students.

H2: Emotional intelligence will have a negative relationship with stress among university students.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The study sampled 70 university students aged 18- 25 from the city of Mohali, Punjab.

2.2 Measures

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS): The Perceived Stress Scale was used to measure perceived stress for the study. The self- report scale was developed by (Cohen, 1983). The scale consists of 10 items and was scored on a 5-point Likert scale which included Never (0), Almost Never (1), Sometimes (2), Fairly Often (3) and Very Often (4).

The Schutte Self Report Emotional Intelligence Scale (SSEIT): This scale was a measure of the general emotional intelligence of the participants. The self-report scale was developed by Schutte (1998) and it consists of 33-items ranging from Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Neutral (3), Somewhat Disagree (4) and Strongly Disagree (5).

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS): Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS)- The Warwick- Edinburgh Mental Well- Being Scale was developed to monitor well-being at a population level. It was developed by Tennant et al., (2007) and it consists of 14 items including both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions. The participants were asked to score items on a 5 point-Likert scale which included none of the time (1), rarely (2), some of the time (3), often (4) and all of the time (5).

2.3 Procedures

Participants were first provided with a brief description of the purpose and objectives of the study, along with an assurance of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The questionnaires were administered online via Google Forms to ensure accessibility and convenience. The survey included standardized psychological measures assessing emotional intelligence, stress, and mental health. Participants were instructed to complete the forms honestly and without external assistance. Upon completion, each participant was thanked for their time and cooperation, and any questions or concerns they had regarding the study was addressed.

3. Analysis of Data

Results

Table 1: *N, Mean and Standard Deviation*

	Emotional Intelligence	Stress	Mental Health
N	70	70	70
Mean	122	20.5	45.0
Standard deviation	13.4	6.37	10.2

Table 2: *Correlation between Emotional Intelligence, Stress and Mental Health*

	Emotional Intelligence	Stress	Mental Health
Emotional Intelligence	—		
Stress	-0.477***	—	
Mental Health	0.515***	-0.650***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

4. Discussion of Results

The primary aim of this study was to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, stress and mental health among university students. The findings indicate that emotional intelligence is significantly and positively correlated with mental health ($r = 0.515$, $p < .001$) suggesting that individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to experience better mental health outcomes. Conversely, emotional intelligence demonstrates a significant negative correlation with stress ($r = -0.477$, $p < .001$), implying that higher emotional intelligence is associated with lower levels of stress. Additionally, stress showed a strong negative

correlation with mental health ($r=-0.650$, $p<.001$), indicating that increased stress levels are linked to poorer mental health.

These findings are consistent with our hypothesis that emotional intelligence would be positively related to mental health and negatively related to stress. The pattern of results is also consistent with the meta-analysis of the relationship between emotional intelligence and health conducted by Martins, Ramalho and Morin (2010). The sample was based on the results of 19,815 participants and they found that the average correlation between emotional intelligence and mental health was around 0.36, with some measures like trait emotional intelligence showing higher associations of up to 0.50, supporting the results that emotional intelligence is positively related to mental health.

Naidoo (2008) aimed to evaluate the role that emotional intelligence played in the way stress is perceived among 98 first year dental students from the University of the Western Cape, the results revealed a significant inverse relationship between emotional intelligence and perceived stress. Similarly, Singh and Sharma (2012) investigated the relationship between Emotional Intelligence levels, psychological stress levels and acute stress reactivity among 34 male students. Results indicated that high levels of emotional intelligence were associated inversely with acute and chronic perceived stress level.

In terms of mental health, the relationship observed in this study aligns with earlier work highlighting the detrimental effects of stress on mental well-being. Shigemi et al., (1997) demonstrated a significant association between job-related stress and poorer mental health among 763 electric company employees in Japan. Which was consistent with the negative correlation between subjective job stress and mental health found in the present study. Together, these findings suggest that emotional intelligence not only reduces stress but also contributes to better psychological resilience and overall mental health

5. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence, stress, and mental health among university students. It was found that emotional intelligence was significantly positively correlated with mental and negatively correlated with stress, while stress demonstrated a significant negative relationship with mental health. The findings suggested that higher emotional intelligence is associated with better psychological well-being and lower stress levels. By analysing responses from 70 university students in Mohali, Punjab, the study reinforced the idea that emotional intelligence plays a critical role in helping students navigate the challenges of academic life.

As higher education evolves, so does the pressure on students-making it crucial to understand the psychological resources that can protect mental health. Further initiatives should focus on fostering emotional intelligence through targeted skill building in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Training in these areas can help students recognize emotions, manage stress effectively, empathize with others and build strong interpersonal relationships. Despite these promising insights, the study had limitations, including a small and localized sample and reliance on self-report measure, and its cross-sectional design, which limits generalizability and causal interpretations. Addressing these limitations in future research with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs would strengthen the evidence base and enhance applicability.

Ultimately, integrating emotional intelligence development into higher education may serve as a proactive approach to reducing stress and enhancing mental health among students.

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